



Biden aims at 'ghost gun' violence with new federal rule

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Monday took fresh aim at ghost guns, the privately made firearms without serial numbers that are increasingly cropping up in violent crimes, as he struggles to break past gun-control opposition to address firearm deaths.

Speaking at the White House, Biden highlighted the Justice Department's work to finalize new regulations to crack down on ghost guns, and announced the nomination of Steve Dettelbach, who served as a U.S. attorney in Ohio from 2009 to 2016, to run the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. "Law enforcement is sounding the alarm," Biden said of ghost guns, briefly holding one up for cameras to see in the Rose Garden. "Our communities are paying the price."

Continued on next page

GHOST BUSTERS



President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco and Mia Tretta arrive to speak in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, Monday, April 11, 2022, to announce a final version of the administration's ghost gun rule, which comes with the White House and the Justice Department under growing pressure to crack down on gun deaths.

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Continued from Front

He promised the new regulations would save lives. Still, the announcement on guns highlights the limits of Biden's influence to push a sweeping congressional overhaul of the nation's firearm laws in response to both a recent surge in violent crime and continued mass shootings. Congress has deadlocked on legislative proposals to reform gun laws for a decade, and executive actions have faced stiff headwinds in federal courts — even as the Democratic base has grown more vocal in calling on Biden to take more consequential action.

Dettelbach's confirmation, too, is likely to be an uphill battle. Biden had to withdraw the nomination of his first ATF nominee, gun-control advocate David Chipman, after it stalled for months because of opposition from Republicans and some Democrats in the Senate. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have failed to get nominees for the ATF position through the politically fraught process since the director's position was made confirmable in 2006. Since then, only one nominee, former U.S. Attorney B. Todd Jones, has been confirmed. Jones made it through the Senate in 2013 but only after a six-month struggle. Jones was acting director when President Barack Obama nominated him in January 2013.

The Biden administration's plan on guns was first reported by Politico.

For nearly a year, the ghost gun rule has been making its way through the federal regulation process. Gun safety groups and Democrats in Congress have been pushing for the Justice Department to finish the rule for months. It will probably be met with heavy resistance from gun groups and draw litigation in the coming weeks.

Gun Owners of America vowed that it would immediately fight the rule.

"Just as we opposed the Trump Administration's arbitrary ban on bump stocks, GOA will also sue Biden's ATF to halt the implementation of this rule," Aidan



This Nov. 27, 2019, file photo shows "ghost guns" on display at the headquarters of the San Francisco Police Department in San Francisco.

Johnston, the group's director of federal affairs said in a statement. The group believes the rule violates the U.S. Constitution and several federal laws.

But gun safety advocacy groups, like Everytown for Gun Safety, which pushed the federal government for years to take action on ghost guns, applauded Biden's moves and insisted that both Dettelbach's appointment and the finalized rule will help combat gun violence.

"Ghost guns look like a gun, they shoot like a gun, and they kill like a gun, but up until now they haven't been regulated like a gun," said John Feinblatt, Everytown's president.

Christian Heyne, the vice president of policy at Brady, another gun control group, said Dettelbach was "an unimpeachable public servant who has spent a career using the levers of government to hold negligent or nefarious actors accountable."

Justice Department statistics show that nearly 24,000 ghost guns were recovered by law enforcement at

crime scenes and reported to the government from 2016 to 2020. It is hard to say how many are circulating on the streets, in part because in many cases police departments don't contact the government about the guns because they can't be traced.

The new rule changes the current definition of a firearm under federal law to include unfinished parts, like the frame of a handgun or the receiver of a long gun. It says those parts must be licensed and include serial numbers. Manufacturers must also run background checks before a sale — as they do with other commercially made firearms. The requirement applies regardless of how the firearm was made, meaning it includes ghost guns made from individual parts, kits, or by 3D-printers.

Federally licensed firearms dealers must retain key records until they shut down their business or licensed activity and then transfer the records to ATF as they are currently required to do at the end of licensed activity. Previously, these

dealers were permitted to destroy most records after 20 years, making it harder for law enforcement to trace firearms found at crime scenes.

"A year ago this week standing here with many of you, I instructed the attorney general to write a regulation that would rein in the proliferation of ghost guns because I was having trouble getting anything passed in the Congress," Biden said.

The rule goes into effect 120 days from the date of publication in the Federal Register

For years, federal officials have been sounding the alarm about an increasing black market for homemade, military-style semi-automatic rifles and handguns. As well as turning up more frequently at crime scenes, ghost guns have been increasingly encountered when federal agents buy guns in undercover operations from gang members and other criminals.

Some states, like California, have enacted laws in recent years to require serial numbers to be stamped on

ghost guns.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, who was attending Monday's event at the White House, applauded the move and pointed to a serious uptick in ghost guns being found by police. Police in Philadelphia have seen nearly a 500% increase in the number of ghost guns recovered in the past two years, Shapiro said. And just last week, a police officer there was shot by a ghost gun-wielding 18-year-old, who police said had also shot three others.

"This loophole has caused our nation countless lives," Shapiro said in an interview. "Today is a critically important step to close that loophole."

He said the move is likely to help drive down violence and aid both police and prosecutors in bringing their cases. The rule is also likely to help bring down the number of people who shouldn't be purchasing firearms before a gun lands in their hand, he said.

"There are two challenges: One, criminals can easily buy them without going through a background check. And two, they are unserialized and untraceable."

The critical component in building an untraceable gun is what is known as the lower receiver, a part typically made of metal or polymer. An unfinished receiver — sometimes referred to as an "80-percent receiver" — can be legally bought online with no serial numbers or other markings on it, no license required.

Police across the country have been reporting spikes in ghost guns being recovered by officers. The New York Police Department, for example, said officers found 131 firearms without serial numbers since January. A gunman who killed his wife and four others in Northern California in 2017 had been prohibited from owning firearms, but he built his own to skirt the court order before his rampage. And in 2019, a teenager used a homemade handgun to fatally shoot two classmates and wound three others at a school in suburban Los Angeles. □

Associated Press

Philadelphia to restore indoor mask mandate as cases rise

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM
Associated Press

Philadelphia became the first major U.S. city to reinstate its indoor mask mandate on Monday after reporting a sharp increase in coronavirus infections, with the city's top health official saying she wanted to forestall a potential new wave driven by an omicron subvariant.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases have risen more than 50% in 10 days, the threshold at which the city's guidelines call for people to wear masks indoors, said Dr. Cheryl Bettigole, the health commissioner. Health officials believe the recent spike is being driven by the highly transmissible BA.2 subvariant of omicron, which has spread rapidly throughout Europe and Asia, and has become dominant in the U.S. in recent weeks.

"If we fail to act now, knowing that every previous wave of infections has been followed by a wave of hospitalizations, and then a wave of deaths, it will be too late for many of our residents," Bettigole said. "This is our chance to get ahead of the pandemic, to put our masks on until we have more information about the severity of this



A sign requiring masks as a precaution against the spread of the coronavirus on a store front in Philadelphia, is seen Feb. 16, 2022.

new variant."

Most states and cities dropped their masking requirements in February and early March following new guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that put less focus on case counts and more on hospital capacity. The CDC said at that time that most Americans could safely take off their masks. Philadelphia dropped its mask mandate March 2, and Bettigole acknowledged "it was wonderful to feel that sense of normalcy

again."

"I sincerely wish we didn't have to do this again. But I am very worried about our vulnerable neighbors and loved ones," she said.

The city is reporting more than 140 cases per day — a fraction of what it saw at the height of the omicron surge — and hospitalizations remain low at only 46 patients. About 750 Philadelphia residents died in the wintertime omicron surge, Bettigole said.

Health inspectors will start to enforce the mask man-

date at city businesses starting April 18.

The restaurant industry pushed back against re-imposed masking, saying workers will bear the brunt of customer anger over the new rules.

"This announcement is a major blow to thousands of small businesses and other operators in the city who were hoping this spring would be the start of recovery," said Ben Fileccia, senior director of operations at the Pennsylvania Restaurant & Lodging Association.

Bettigole said masking will help restaurants and other businesses stay open, while a huge new wave of COVID-19 would keep customers at home.

In New York City, Mayor Eric Adams has paused his push to unwind many of the city's virus rules as cases have risen, opting for now to keep a mask mandate for 2 to 4-year-olds in city schools and preschools. But Adams, a Democrat who has said New Yorkers should not let the pandemic run their lives, has already lifted most other mask mandates and rules requiring proof of vaccination to dine in restaurants, work out at gyms or attend shows.

Adams was asked at a virtual news conference Monday afternoon if he was considering reimposing the New York City mask mandate in light of Philadelphia's decision. The mayor said he would listen to his team of medical doctors for their advice on whether to bring back any restrictions. Adams himself tested positive for COVID-19 on Sunday.

New York City is now averaging around 1,800 new cases per day, about three times higher than in early March when New York began easing rules. □

Fearless Girl statue will stay put opposite NYSE for now

By KAREN MATTHEWS
Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The 4-foot bronze Fearless Girl statue that was deposited in front of New York City's Charging Bull in 2017 will remain in its current spot opposite the New York Stock Exchange at least until early next year while city officials wrestle with a permanent disposition for the popular symbol of female empowerment, a city board decided Monday.

Members of the Public Design Commission granted an 11-month permit extension and said they would spend the next six months exploring a way for New York City to take ownership of the statue, which is currently the subject of liti-

gation between artist Kristen Visbal and State Street Global Advisors, the Boston-based asset-management firm that commissioned it.

"We today, the Public Design Commission, cannot make this a permanent piece of art," commission president Signe Nielsen said. "We can urge that steps be taken to enable this work to be considered for the public collection."

The statue of a spunky young girl was supposed to be a temporary installation when State Street commissioned it in 2017 to urge higher representation of women on corporate boards, but permits to keep it on display were extended several times once it became a major tourist

attraction.

Fearless Girl was moved to its current location opposite the Stock Exchange in December 2018 and has continued to draw selfie-taking visitors there.

Visbal, meanwhile, began selling replicas of the statue around the world. State Street, which had an ownership contract with the artist, sued Visbal alleging the replica sales violated the agreement, and Visbal countersued, arguing that the company was infringing on her rights.

"The commission should be aware that State Street has sued me, which makes it impossible for them to act as fair agents on my behalf," Visbal told design commission members over



In this June 16, 2021, photo, the "Fearless Girl" statue faces the New York Stock Exchange.

Associated Press

Zoom.

She urged the city to take ownership of the piece itself. "I am convinced the only way artists' rights can be honored and acknowledged is if the city owns the

work," she said.

Both Visbal and State Street indicated support for the board's vote to renew the statue's temporary permit while working toward a permanent solution. □

Families of 5 killed in Indiana FedEx shooting file lawsuit

By **RICK CALLAHAN**
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Relatives of five of the eight people who were shot and killed last year at an Indianapolis FedEx warehouse by a former employee sued the shipping giant and a security company on Monday, accusing them of negligence and failing to ensure that the workplace was safe.

The federal lawsuit, which names as defendants the FedEx Corporation, three of its operating units and Securitas Security Services USA, alleges that gunman Brandon Scott Hole, 19, had "exhibited emotional and mental instability on multiple instances" before the April 15, 2021, shooting. The suit contends the defendants "knew or should have known of Hole's potentially violent and dangerous propensities, which were reasonably likely to result in injuries to himself and others."

The families' complaint, filed in U.S. District Court in Indianapolis, seeks unspecified damages.

The plaintiffs are relatives of shooting victims Amarjeet Johal, 66; Amarjit Sekhon,



Attorneys Daniel Chamberlain, left center, and Melvin Hewitt, Jr., right center, along with family members Gurinder Johal, left, and Matthew Alexander announce a lawsuit in Indianapolis, Monday, April 11, 2022 on behalf of five families of the victims murdered in a mass shooting at the Indianapolis FedEx Ground facility on April 15, 2021. Johal's mother, Amarjeet Johal, and Alexander's daughter, Karli Smith, were among the eight workers killed in the shooting.

Associated Press

48; Jasvinder Kaur, 50; John Weisert, 74; and Karli Smith, 19.

The families of the three other people killed — Matthew R Alexander, 32; Samaria Blackwell, 19; and Jaswinder Singh, 68 — are not involved in the suit.

Johal's youngest son, Gary Johal, said that hurt and

pain remain ever-present for him and his relatives nearly a year after her death.

"It sucks that we have to go through this when this whole incident was 100% preventable," he said at a news conference with two of the plaintiffs' attorneys.

The suit alleges that FedEx

should have taken additional security measures to protect the Indianapolis facility's staff in light of previous mass shootings at other FedEx facilities, including an April 2014 shooting at a FedEx center in an Atlanta suburb where a gunman wounded six people.

After Hole arrived at the In-

dianapolis facility, he confronted Securitas security staff and "began banging on a door and causing a disturbance," according to the lawsuit, which also contends the actions should have been recognized as those of a potentially dangerous person.

The suit accuses Securitas of failing to adequately train its staff to respond to dangerous or potentially dangerous situations, and failing to realize that Hole was "a potential threat."

After he was denied entry to the building, the suit states, Hole returned to his car and opened fire minutes later in the parking lot and then at the facility's entrance, killing the eight victims and wounding five other people.

"Obviously there wasn't enough in place," said Melvin L. Hewitt, one of the plaintiffs' attorneys. "It's our position that it was an entirely preventable."

FedEx said in a statement that it was aware of the lawsuit and was reviewing the allegations. The company added that it continues "to mourn the loss of our team members in the senseless tragedy." □

California utility to pay \$55 million for massive wildfires



This Nov. 15, 2018, aerial file photo shows the remains of residences leveled by the Camp wildfire in Paradise, Calif.

Associated Press

By **OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ**

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Pacific Gas & Electric has agreed to pay more than \$55 million to avoid criminal prosecution for two major wildfires started by aging Northern California power lines belonging to the nation's largest utility, prosecu-

tors announced Monday. PG&E does not admit wrongdoing in the two settlements reached with prosecutors for last year's Dixie Fire — one of the biggest wildfires in California's history — and the 2019 Kincade Fire in Sonoma County. The deals expedite

damage payments to the hundreds of people whose homes were destroyed.

PG&E also will submit to five years of oversight by an independent monitor similar to the supervision it faced during five years of criminal probation after it was convicted for misconduct that contributed to its natural gas explosion that killed eight people in 2010.

Pacific Gas & Electric has been blamed for more than 30 wildfires since 2017 that wiped out more than 23,000 homes and businesses and killed more than 100 people. It previously reached settlements with wildfire victims of more than \$25.5 billion.

The Dixie Fire burned nearly 1 million acres (3,900 square kilometers) in Butte, Plumas, Lassen, Shasta, and Tehama counties and

destroyed more than 1,300 homes and other buildings. The blaze was caused by a tree hitting electrical distribution lines west of a dam in the Sierra Nevada, where the fire began on July 13, 2021, according to investigators with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The settlement for the Dixie Fire was made by district attorneys in Plumas, Lassen, Tehama, Shasta and Butte counties, who had not yet filed charges.

Sonoma County prosecutors filed 33 criminal charges last year accusing PG&E of inadvertently injuring six firefighters and endangering public health with smoke and ash from the 2019 Kincade Fire.

Fire officials said a PG&E transmission line sparked the fire, which destroyed

374 buildings in wine country and caused nearly 100,000 people to flee as it burned through 120 square miles (311 square kilometers). It was the largest evacuation in the county's history, prosecutors said, including the entire towns of Healdsburg, Windsor and Geyserville.

The utility's federal probation ended in late January, raising worries from the judge who had been using his powers to oversee the utility to try to force management to reduce the fire risks posed by its crumbling power lines. At the time PG&E emerged from the probation, U.S. District Judge William Alsup warned PG&E remained a "continuing menace to California" and urged state prosecutors to try to rein in the company. □

NSO turns to U.S. Supreme Court for immunity in WhatsApp suit

By JOSEF FEDERMAN

Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli spyware maker NSO Group is turning to the U.S. Supreme Court as it seeks to head off a high-profile lawsuit filed by the WhatsApp messaging service. In a filing to the Supreme Court, NSO said it should be recognized as a foreign government agent and therefore be entitled to immunity under U.S. law limiting lawsuits against foreign countries. The request appeals a pair of earlier federal court rulings that rejected similar arguments by the Israeli company. WhatsApp parent Facebook, now called Meta Platforms Inc., sued NSO in 2019 for allegedly targeting some 1,400 users of its encrypted messaging service with highly sophisticated spyware. It is trying to block NSO from Facebook platforms and servers and seeks unspecified damages. Granting sovereign immunity to NSO would greatly hinder WhatsApp's case. It also could provide protection from a potentially risky discovery process that could reveal its customers and technological secrets. NSO is seeking to have the entire case dismissed. In its petition, NSO said that lower courts have given

mixed opinions on sovereign immunity over the years and that it was crucial for the Supreme Court to rule on an issue that has great national security implications for governments around the world.

"Many nations, including the United States, rely on private contractors to conduct or support core governmental activities," it wrote in the April 6 filing. "If such contractors can never seek immunity ... then the United States and other countries may soon find their military and intelligence operations disrupted by lawsuits against their agents."

NSO's flagship product, Pegasus, allows operators to covertly infiltrate a target's mobile phone, gaining access to messages and contacts, the camera and microphone and location history. It says that it sells the product only to government law enforcement agencies to catch criminals and terrorists and that all sales are approved by Israel's Defense Ministry. It does not identify its clients.

But critics say a number of clients, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Poland, have abused the system to snoop on critics and stifle



A logo adorns a wall on a branch of the Israeli NSO Group company, near the southern Israeli town of Saphir, Aug. 24, 2021.

Associated Press

dissent. WhatsApp says at least 100 of the users connected to its lawsuit were journalists, rights activists and civil society members. NSO says it has no control over how its clients use the product and no access to the data they collect, though it claims it has safeguards in place to prevent abuses. Critics say the safeguards are insufficient.

"NSO's spyware invades the rights of citizens, journalists, and human rights activists around the globe and their attacks must be stopped," WhatsApp said in a statement.

"Two United States courts

have already rejected NSO's contrived bid for immunity and we believe there is no reason for the Supreme Court to hear their last-ditch attempt to avoid accountability," it said, adding that multiple human rights groups and tech companies have said granting immunity to spyware companies "would be dangerous for the world." The WhatsApp case is among a series of legal battles plaguing NSO. Apple last year filed a lawsuit that it says aims to prevent NSO from breaking into products. It claimed Pegasus had affected a small

number of iPhone users worldwide, calling NSO's employees "amoral 21st century mercenaries."

NSO last year also was blacklisted by the U.S. Commerce Department, limiting its access to U.S. technology. U.S. officials said the company's products were complicit in "transnational repression."

NSO appears to face a formidable challenge. For starters, the Supreme Court agrees to consider just 1% or so of the requests put before it.

It could be months before the court decides whether to review the case. But even if it does, NSO would have to convince the court that it is a state agent and entitled to immunity.

Eugene Kontorovich, an Israeli-American professor at the George Mason University Scalia Law School and director of its Center for the Middle East and International Law, said it was a "very interesting" and "very serious" case. But he said he was skeptical NSO would prevail.

"They're a software company. They create a product that's been licensed to foreign governments and which governments can use," he said. "An agent usually is something of a much higher standard." □

IS supporter found guilty of killing UK lawmaker David Amess

LONDON (AP) — A jury deliberated for just 18 minutes Monday before finding a fervent Islamic State supporter guilty of stabbing lawmaker David Amess to death a slaying that shocked the nation and sparked calls for increased police protection for politicians.

Ali Harbi Ali, 26, was found guilty by London's Central Criminal Court of murder and preparing terrorist acts. Ali stabbed the veteran British lawmaker to death last year while he was meeting with voters at a church hall in eastern England.

Ali, who had spent years researching and planning potential attacks on lawmakers, had defended his

actions by saying Amess deserved to die as a result of voting for airstrikes on Syria in 2014 and 2015.

Ali, a London man with Somali heritage, had denied charges of murder and preparing acts of terrorism. Opening the trial, prosecutor Tom Little said the case was "nothing less than an assassination" carried out because of a "warped and twisted and violent ideology." "It was a murder carried out by that young man who for many years had been planning just such an attack and who was, and is, a committed, fanatical, radicalized Islamist terrorist," he said.

Little said Ali bought the knife used to attack Amess

five years earlier, and that Ali tricked his way into meeting Amess by pretending to be one of his constituents.

Amess, 69, had been a member of Parliament since 1983. He was pronounced dead at the scene after the stabbing.

The prosecutor also said that Ali had researched and planned attacks on lawmakers and the Parliament building from at least 2019. The research included reconnaissance trips targeting work and home addresses of two other lawmakers, Mike Freer and Cabinet member Michael Gove, he added.

The slaying of Amess shook the nation, as lawmakers



In this Friday, Oct. 15, 2021 file photo, an image of murdered British Conservative lawmaker David Amess is displayed near the altar in St Peter's Catholic Church before a vigil in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, England.

Associated Press

often meet directly with the public. It came five years after Labour Party

lawmaker Jo Cox was shot and stabbed to death by a far-right extremist. □

Sharif sworn in as Pakistan's new PM after week of drama

By KATHY GANNON

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan's parliament on Monday elected opposition lawmaker Shahbaz Sharif as the new prime minister, following a week of political turmoil that led to the weekend ouster of Premier Imran Khan.

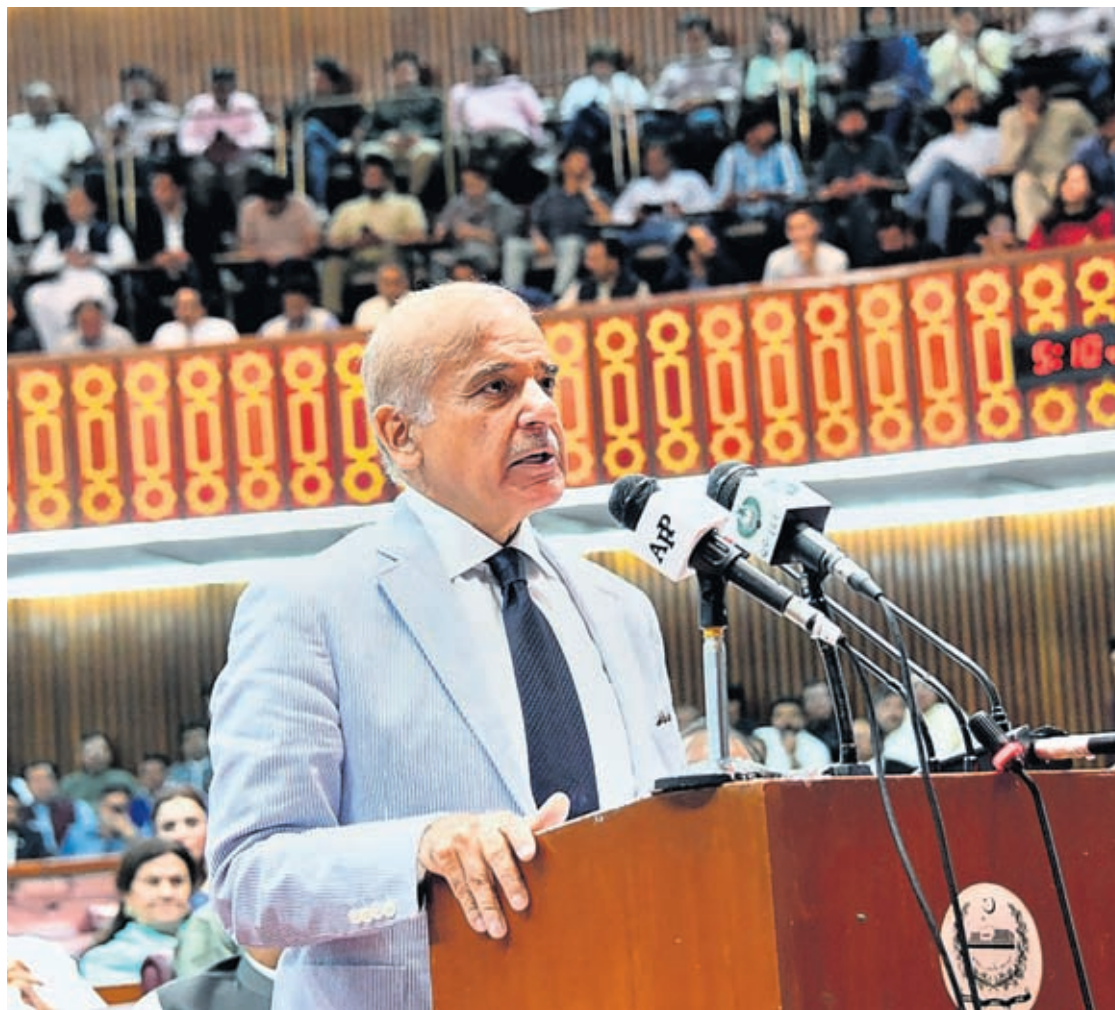
Sharif took the oath of office inside the stately, white marble palace known as the Presidency in a brief ceremony.

But his elevation won't guarantee a peaceful path forward or solve the country's many economic problems, including high inflation and a soaring energy crisis.

Sharif, the brother of disgraced former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, won with 174 votes after more than 100 lawmakers from Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or Pakistan Justice Party, resigned and walked out of the National Assembly in protest.

Those 174 votes — two more than the required simple majority — are enough to pass laws in the 342-seat assembly. If Khan's followers take to the streets, as he has vowed, it could create more pressure on lawmakers and deepen the crisis. Khan, a former cricket star whose conservative Islamist ideology and dogged independence characterized his three years and eight months in office, was ousted early Sunday. He lost a no-confidence vote after being deserted by his party allies and a key coalition partner.

In a show of strength and a precursor to the political



In this photo released by National Assembly of Pakistan, newly elected Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif addresses a National Assembly session, in Islamabad, Pakistan, Monday, April 11, 2022.

Associated Press

uncertainty ahead, Khan rallied hundreds of thousands of supporters in protests Sunday night, describing the new leadership as an "imposed government" that colluded with the U.S. to oust him. His backers marched in cities across Pakistan, waving large party flags and shouted slogans promising to return him to power. The crowds were dominated by youths who make up the backbone of Khan's supporters. The political drama began April 3 when Khan side-stepped an initial no-confidence vote demanded by the opposition by dissolving parliament and calling early elections. The opposition, which accuses Khan of economic mismanagement, appealed to the Supreme Court. After four days of deliberations, the court said Khan's move was illegal and the no-confidence vote went ahead, leading to his ouster.

Khan has demanded early elections — the balloting is not due before August 2023. He has tapped into anti-American sentiment in

Pakistan, accusing Washington of conspiring with his opponents to topple him. That conspiracy theory resonates with his youthful base, which often sees the U.S. war on terrorism after 9/11 as unfairly targeting Pakistan.

Khan claims Washington opposes him because of his independent foreign policy favoring China and Russia. He was criticized for a visit he made on Feb. 24 to Moscow, where he met with President Vladimir Putin as Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine.

The U.S. State Department has denied any involvement in Pakistan's internal politics.

China, which is Pakistan's key ally and investor, said Monday it would support any government.

"As Pakistan's close neighbor and iron-clad friend, we sincerely hope that all factions in Pakistan will remain united and work together for national stability and development," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said at a briefing. "I would like to emphasize

that no matter how the political situation changes in Pakistan, China will unswervingly adhere to its friendly policy toward Pakistan."

China is heavily invested in Pakistan in its multibillion-dollar global initiative to link south and central Asia to Beijing.

Pakistan's longtime rival India also sent congratulations to Sharif, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi saying his country "desires peace and stability."

The two countries have fought three wars, coming dangerously close to a fourth over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, which is divided between the two and claimed by both.

The opposition coalition consists of parties that cross the political divide, from the left to the radically religious. The two largest parties are the Pakistan Muslim League, headed by Sharif, and the Pakistan People's Party, co-chaired by the son and husband of Benazir Bhutto, the former prime

minister who was killed in 2007.

A few wealthy and powerful families have dominated Pakistan's politics for decades, with power most often alternating between the Sharif and the Bhutto camps. Both political houses have been accused of and at times convicted of widespread corruption. They have dismissed the allegations as being politically motivated.

Nawaz Sharif was unseated by the Supreme Court in 2015 after being convicted of financial irregularities revealed in the so-called Panama Papers — a collection of leaked secret financial documents showing how some of the world's richest hide their money and involving a global law firm based in Panama. He was disqualified from holding office by the Supreme Court.

Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto's husband who served as president of Pakistan after the 2008 election, has spent more than seven years in prison, convicted on corruption charges.

Khan came to power in 2018, promising to break the pattern of family rule in Pakistan, but his opponents said he was elected with help from the powerful military, which has ruled the country for half of its 75-year history.

Nawaz Sharif was also ousted in 1999, in a military coup, and Benazir Bhutto's government was ousted several times after the military sided with her opposition. In Pakistani politics, where loyalties are often fluid, Bhutto's fiercest opposition often came from Sharif's party.

Shahbaz Sharif has served three times as chief minister of Pakistan's largest, most influential Punjab province, home to 60% of the country's 220 million people. His son, Hamza, was elected last week as the new chief minister by the Punjab provincial parliament, ousting Khan's nominee. Khan's party is challenging that election, and the younger Sharif has yet to be sworn in. □

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U.K. sanctions 2 Bosnian-Serb leader for undermining peace

Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain sanctioned two leading Bosnian-Serb politicians Monday, accusing them of encouraging ethnic hatred and jeopardizing the peace accord that ended the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina more than 25 years ago.

Milorad Dodik and Zeljka Cvijanovic will be hit with asset freezes and travel bans in the first sanctions the U.K. has leveled in Bosnia. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine had emboldened the pair to further erode the international rules based system in the Western Balkans.

"These two politicians are deliberately undermining the hard won peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina," Truss said in a statement. "Encouraged by Putin, their reckless behavior threatens stability and security across the Western Balkans."

U.K. authorities say the pair have have used their positions to push for the de facto secession of Republika Srpska — one of two semi-autonomous regions that comprise the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina — in direct contravention of the country's constitution. The U.S. Treasury Department on Monday imposed



President of the Republic of Srpska Milorad Dodik, left, speaks with Prime Minister of Republika Srpska Zeljka Cvijanovic during the final campaign rally in the Bosnian town of Banja Luka, 240 kms northwest of Sarajevo, on, Oct. 5, 2018.

Associated Press

its own sanctions on seven more people from the Western Balkans.

Dodik has for years advocated separating the Bosnian Serb mini-state from the federation and uniting it with neighboring Serbia. He is the Bosnian Serb member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, which also includes representatives of the Bosnian Muslim and Croat communities.

Secession would violate the Dayton Accords, the

1995 U.S.-sponsored agreement that ended Bosnia's civil war, which killed more than 100,000 people and left millions homeless. The agreement established two separate governing entities in Bosnia — one run by Bosnia's Serbs and the other controlled by the country's Bosniaks and Croats.

The two entities are linked by joint institutions, and all actions taken at a national level have to be reached by consensus among the

three ethnic groups.

U.S. authorities had previously sanctioned Dodik, accusing him of "corrupt activities" that threaten to destabilize the region. The Americans allege that he used his leadership position to accumulate wealth through graft and bribery. Cvijanovic, the president of Republika Srpska, the Serb entity, has proposed legislation to transfer powers from the national government to her mini-state, Brit-

ish authorities said. She has also glorified war criminals and denied acts of genocide during the civil war, they said.

The top international official in Bosnia, Christian Schmidt, described the decision to impose sanctions on Dodik and Cvijanovic as "reasonable" and thanked the British government for its commitment to Bosnia's stability and security.

"Dodik and Cvijanovic missed every opportunity to get back into constructive dialogue for the benefit of the people in this country," said Schmidt, who heads the U.N.'s Office of High Representative in Bosnia. "They will have to bear the consequences of their words and deeds, and the U.K. sanctions are the continuation of the consequences that started in January with the U.S. sanctions."

The practical impact of Monday's actions is unclear. Both Dodik and Cvijanovic said they don't have assets in the U.K.

"All they (British) say are lies. They are old manipulators and enemies of the Serb people. I told them so many times before," said Dodik. "They are helpless in their feud with Putin, and they accuse the two of us now of acting on orders from Putin." □

Warsaw takes over Russia-built compound to give to Ukraine

WARSAW (AP) — A disputed compound in the Polish capital of Warsaw administered by Russia's diplomatic mission is being taken over by the city and will be made available to the Ukrainian community, the mayor said Monday.

Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski was at the site early Monday and said a bailiff had entered the two apparently empty, fenced buildings, nicknamed "Spyville" by Warsaw residents, to check on their condition and to mark them as seized by the city.

Trzaskowski said Warsaw was getting back the compound "unlawfully" occupied by Russia. Last month he said Russia's Feb. 24 in-

vasion of Ukraine added urgency to the decades-long procedure.

"It is very symbolic that we are closing this procedure of many years now, at the time of Russia's aggression" against Ukraine, Trzaskowski said on Twitter.

Ukraine's ambassador, Andrii Deshchysia, told Poland's state news agency PAP that Ukraine will file to lease the compound, which could be used for a school or a Ukrainian culture center.

One of Trzaskowski's proposals for the 100-odd apartments there is to accommodate war refugees from Ukraine. More than 2.6 million of them have crossed into Poland since

the Russian invasion began. Russia's Embassy, which had the tall apartment blocks built in the 1970s on land obtained from the city, has been refusing court orders to pay to lease the land or hand it over.

Once busy, the buildings became empty in the 1990s, after Poland shed its communist rule and Soviet Union's dominance in 1989, and after the Soviet Union itself dissolved in 1991.

Ever since, Poland has been saying that the contract for the lease of the plot of land had expired and demanded that it be returned. But its gates remained closed and guarded.

Russia's diplomatic and business missions have



Polish security team guarding entrance to a compound that had been used by Soviet-era and Russian diplomats and businessmen and is being claimed back by the city of Warsaw with the intention to make it available to the Ukrainian community in Warsaw, Poland, on Monday, April 11, 2022.

Associated Press

much more property in Poland than Poland has in Russia, which is in viola-

tion of reciprocity rules, according to Poland's Foreign Ministry. □

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Aruba National Park Foundation: Herpetologist Dr. Jeff Goessling studying local lizard known as Cododo

Meet herpetologist, researcher and our friend Dr. Jeff Goessling, who has been studying the Aruba whiptail lizard (Cnemidophorus arubensis), known locally as Cododo.

Jeff marked the female Cododo in this image on 2 July 2019, and she is so far the longest-living marked lizard Jeff has recaptured out of hundreds having been marked. When Jeff first started PIT tagging Cododos in 2017, he really had no idea about their life history strategy.

Would they live years, decades, or even longer? Jeff's research has been uncovering some myster-

ies: Cododos reach maturity by about 1 year of age, many live into their 2nd year to reproduce, and very few live past their 3rd birthday – which is surprisingly short when compared to other desert species in, for example, the USA. Male Cododos seem to have one bright blue year during which they get eaten by somebody bigger (bird or snake).

Jeff states that he is only just scratching the natural history surface on this fascinating lizard. The charismatic Cododo are largely herbivorous and are themselves fascinated by people (they frequently wander into Jeff's backpack or



car to check out his equipment), and make eye contact and then 'hand-wave' to signal they see you.

Cododos are ecologically critical in Aruba as they are the main prey base for the endemic Aruba Island Rat-

hlesnake or Cascabel (*Crotalus unicolor*) and several native birds, including Shoco and Warawara. □



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At Radisson Blu Aruba: Wednesdays are Winesdays

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to discover. Go and find out why **Sunset Bistro** is the next hotspot for a bite, a drink or more.

Unwind with local prices a singing angel

Sunset Bistro offers a nice selection of wines and each Wednesday you will only pay in **Florins**. You decide whether you wish to start at lunch or dinner or even stay for the whole ride. It is all possible. The bistro is already a fav spot for its 'bits and bites', an amazing rooftop terrace where you can chat in all privacy while enjoying the mind-blowing panorama of the Caribbean Sea and the infinity pool. The Dollar to Florin deals on wine bottles start from 12NOON every Wednesday. Now it gets even better because from 7PM you can enjoy the amazing voice of local singer **Amy Sorinio**. The all-round performer has a unique voice and a great energy. She easily connects with her public and enchants you with jazz, easy listening, pop, soul,



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Camping season has finally started!

Oranjestad - A reporter for Bon Dia Aruba toured around the Island visiting different camping sites where campers were already beginning with preparations and setting up for the coming week with many expectations.

"Finally!" is the word that was heard the most after for 2 consecutive years camping was suspended for reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, locals as well as our visitors can enjoy of various vacation days at the beach.

During the visits, it was clear to see that in Bushiri there were already many trailers set up, the same

could be seen at Eagle, Boca Catalina, and Arashi. The only part that did not have much movement as of yesterday was Fisherman Huts where some campers have no yet received their permits to be able to camp in these areas.

The camping season is one of the only moments during the year where Arubans can escape the daily routine to enjoy vacation days. During these days, you can see the unity that exists for community to come together and enjoy of Aruba's beaches, always with the responsibility to care for our nature, to keep our beaches clean and make sure to cause no

harm to the areas.

Bon Dia Aruba spoke to a camper, who mentioned that he considers camping something important for tourism and the development of our economy as well. "We organize very well. We never got any complaints or fines for anything. We keep the area clean, we look for an adequate place for the bathroom placement and set up where we will do the cooking. This way we can keep the area looking organized, so that tourists can come to us and spend time with us, and often times even eat fresh fish with us. They also enjoy this tradition with us and we hope that

this year we can experience the same, so we can help our tourism and our economy," he expressed.

Cuerpo di Polis di Aruba (local authorities) published in a press release that the last day for camping will be the 24th of april.

After the camping season ends, all objects will have to be removed from the beach. If any campers don't comply, the police will remove the objects at the camper's cost. "We call out to all our campers and ask them to keep our beaches clean. Dispose of all trash accordingly." □

The Central Bank of Aruba raised the reserve requirement rate by two percentage points as of March 1, 2022, to reduce commercial banks' excess liquidity

Oranjestad - During its meeting of February 10, 2022, and after reviewing the most recent economic and monetary data, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Centrale Bank van Aruba (CBA) decided to raise the reserve requirement rate from 14.0 percent to 16.0 percent as of March 1st, 2022.

This decision was primarily based on the elevated level of excess liquidity at the commercial banks, and the modest effect of the previous increases in the reserve requirement rate on the level of excess liquidity at the commercial banks.

The following information and analysis were considered in reaching this decision:

International reserves

International reserves (including revaluation differences of gold and foreign exchange holdings), up to and including January 21, 2022, increased by Afl. 49.8 million compared to the end of December 2021. The growth in the international reserves was mainly driven by tourism services. Meanwhile, official reserves rose by Afl. 16.5 million. Consequently, the official and international reserves reached, respectively, Afl. 2,761.4 million and Afl. 3,179.4 million as of January 21, 2022 (Graph 1). Accord-

ingly, the level of reserves remained adequate when benchmarked against the current account payments and the IMF ARA metric (Table 1).

Credit developments

In December 2021, total credit of the commercial banks contracted by Afl. 139.3 million or 3.5 percent to Afl. 3,824.8 million, when compared to the end of 2020. This decline was caused by the categories 'other' (-Afl. 90.0 million/-17.7 percent), 'loans to individuals' (-Afl. 26.0 million/-1.4 percent), and 'business loans' (-Afl. 22.4 million/-1.5 percent). The fall in the category 'other' was primarily the result of a lower amount of government bonds held by the local commercial banks. The drop in the category 'loans to individuals' was due to a decrease in 'consumer credit', which was only partly mitigated by an increase in housing mortgages. The contraction in the category 'business loans', in turn, resulted from downturns in commercial mortgages, as well as current account and term loans.

rose by 3.6 percent compared to the corresponding month a year earlier. The twelve-month average inflation rate amounted to 0.7 percent in December 2021, 0.5 percentage point higher than the previous month (Graph 2). The rise in the CPI compared to a year earlier was mainly caused by higher gasoline prices, which also affected the 'transport' component (1.9 percentage points contribution). This increase was amplified by higher prices for the components 'household operation' (0.6 percentage point contribution), 'food' (0.5 percentage point contribution), 'recreation and culture' (0.3 percentage point contribution), 'miscellaneous goods and services' (0.2 percentage point contribution), 'housing' (0.1 percentage point contribution), and 'restaurants and hotels' (0.1 percentage point contribution). These upturns were slightly offset by lower prices for the 'health' component (-0.1 percentage point contribution). All other components remained unchanged.

Commercial bank liquidity

The aggregate excess liquidity of commercial banks rose to Afl. 1,320.5

million in December 2021, compared to Afl. 1,107.4 million in December 2020 (Graph 3).

The monthly comparison showed an expansion in aggregated excess liquidity in December 2021, compared to November 2021, despite a one percentage point increase in the reserve requirement on the 1st of December 2021. The increase in the reserve requirement rate was counterbalanced by a rise in the total liquid funds held by the commercial banks. Consequently, the level of excess liquidity went up and remained significantly above pre-pandemic levels.

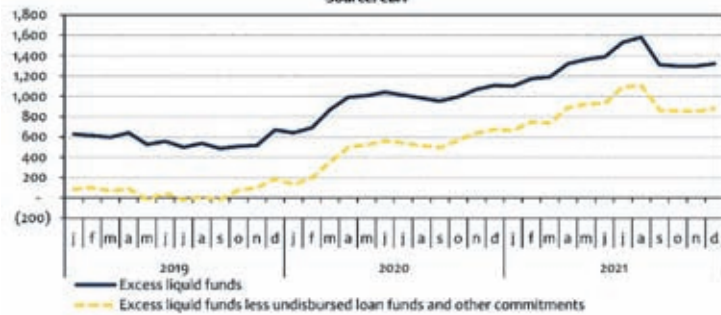
The elevated level of excess liquidity at the commercial banks is partly the result of the continued subdued credit demand. Furthermore, the wage subsidy and FASE programs of the GoA to cushion the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis likely also contributed to the high level of excess liquidity.

Meanwhile, the prudential liquidity ratio of the commercial banks, which measures the percentage of their liquid assets to their total net assets, remained at a comfortable level of 38.0 percent in December 2021, far above the minimum required prudential liquidity ratio of 18.0 percent.□

Table 1: Reserve benchmarks monitored in 2022

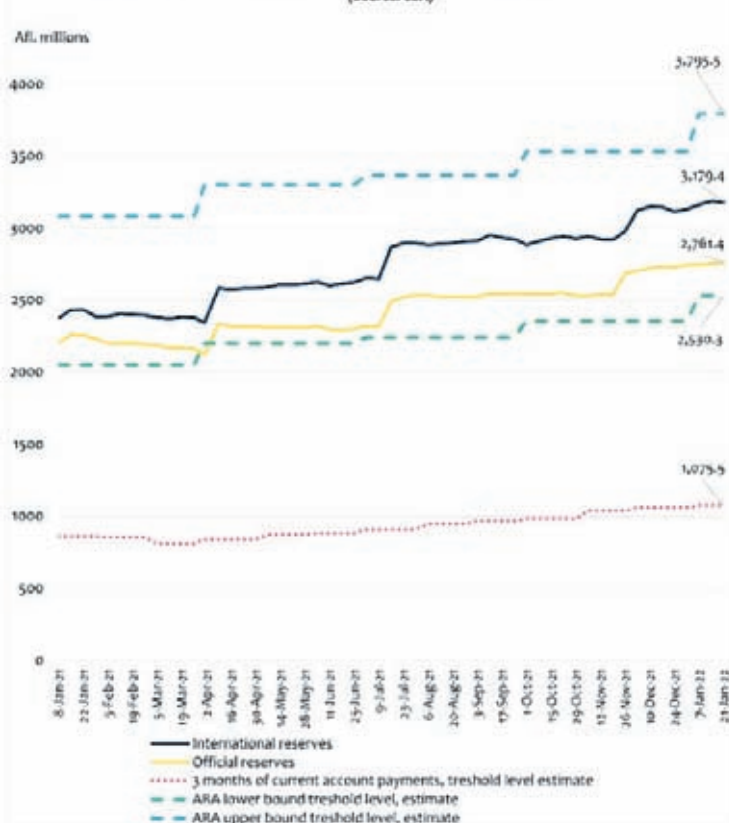
	Jan
CA Coverage Ratio ¹	8.7
IMF ARA Metric ²	109.0
¹ In months	
² In percent	

Graph 3: Excess liquidity of commercial banks in Afl. million
Source: CBA



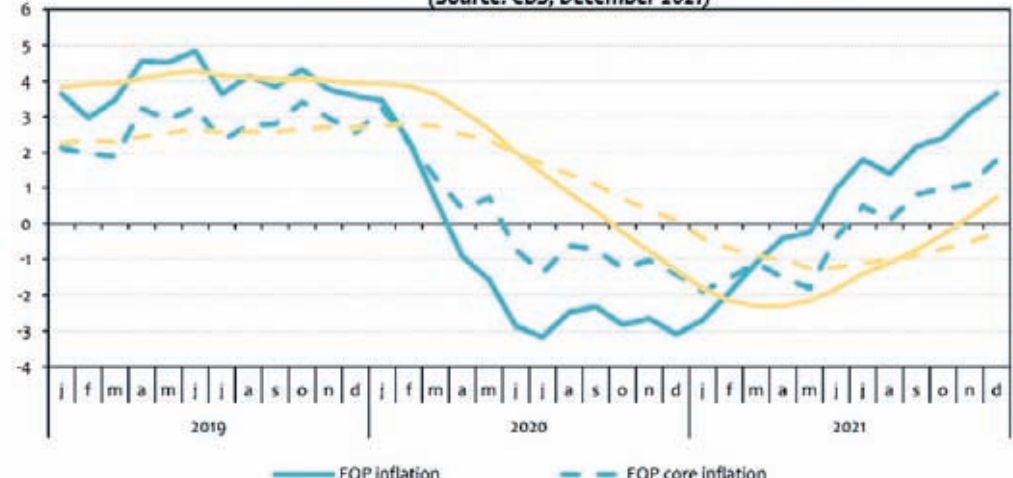
Graph 3: Excess liquidity developments

Graph 1: Official- and international reserves including revaluation differences in Afl. million
(Source: CBA)



Graph 1: Developments in official and international reserves

Graph 2: Inflation based on the consumer price index of Aruba
(Source: CBS, December 2021)



Graph 2: Inflation

Once a retail giant, Kmart nears extinction after closure

By DAVID PORTER
Associated Press

AVENEL, N.J. (AP) — The familiar sights and sounds are still there: the scuffed and faded floor tiles, the relentless beige-on-beige color scheme, the toddlers' clothes and refrigerators and pretty much everything in between.

There's even a canned recording that begins, "Attention, Kmart shoppers" — except it's to remind folks about COVID-19 precautions, not to alert them to a flash sale over in ladies' lingerie like days of old.

Many of the shelves are bare, though, at the Kmart in Avenel, New Jersey, picked over by bargain hunters as the store prepares to close its doors for good April 16.

Once it shuts, the number of Kmart stores in the U.S. — once well over 2,000 — will be down to three in the continental U.S. and a handful of stores elsewhere, according to multiple reports, in a retail world now dominated by Walmart, Target and Amazon.

The demise of the store in the middle-class suburb, 15 miles (24 kilometers) south of New York City, is the tale of the death of the discount department store writ small.

"You're always thinking about it because stores are closing all over, but it's still sad," said cashier Michelle Yavorsky, who said she has worked at the Avenel store for 2 ½ years. "I'll miss the place. A lot of people shopped here."

In its heyday, Kmart sold product lines endorsed by celebrities Martha Stewart and Jaclyn Smith, sponsored NASCAR auto races and was mentioned in movies including "Rain Man" and "Beetlejuice." It was name-dropped in songs by artists from Eminem to the Beastie Boys to Hall & Oates; in 2003, Eminem bought a 29-room, suburban Detroit mansion once owned by former Kmart chairman Chuck Conaway.

The chain cemented a place in American culture with its Blue Light Specials,



People walk into a Kmart in Avenel, N.J., Monday, April 4, 2022. When the New Jersey store closes its doors on April 16, it will leave only three remaining U.S. locations for the former retail powerhouse.

Associated Press

a flashing blue orb affixed to a pole that would beckon shoppers to a flash sale in progress. Part of its success was due to its early adoption of layaway programs, which allowed customers who lacked credit to reserve items and pay for them in installments.

For a time, Kmart had a little bit of everything: You could shop for your kids' back-to-school supplies, get your car tuned up and grab a meal without leaving the premises.

"Kmart was part of America," said Michael Lisicky, a Baltimore-based author who has written several books on U.S. retail history. "Everybody went to Kmart, whether you liked it or not. They had everything. You had toys. You had sporting goods. You had candy. You had stationery. It was something for everybody. This was almost as much of a social visit as it was a shopping visit. You could spend hours here. And these just dotted the American landscape over the years."

Kmart's decline has been slow but steady, brought about by years of falling sales, changes in shopping habits and the looming shadow of Walmart, which

coincidentally began its life within months of Kmart's founding in 1962.

Struggling to compete with Walmart's low prices and Target's trendier offerings, Kmart filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in early 2002 — becoming the largest U.S. retailer to take that step — and announced it would close more than 250 stores.

A few years later, hedge fund executive Edward Lampert combined Sears and Kmart and pledged to return them to their former greatness, but the recession and the rising dominance of Amazon contributed in derailing those goals. Sears filed for Chapter 11 in 2018 and currently has a handful of stores left in the U.S. where it once had thousands.

Kmarts continue to operate in Westwood, New Jersey; Bridgehampton, on New York's Long Island, and Miami.

It didn't have to end this way, according to Mark Cohen, director of retail studies at Columbia University in New York and former CEO of Sears Canada. Trying to compete with Walmart on price was a foolish strategy, he said, and Lampert was criticized for not having a retail background and appearing more interested in stripping off the assets of the two chains for their cash value. "It's a study in greed, avarice and incompetence," Cohen said. "Sears should have never gone away; Kmart was in worse shape, but not fatally so. And now they're both gone."

"Retailers fall by the wayside sometimes because they're selling things people don't want to buy," he continued. "In the case of Kmart, everything they used to sell, people are buying but they're buying it from Walmart and Target."

Transformco, which owns

Kmart and Sears, did not respond to an email seeking comment and a phone number listed for the company was not taking messages.

Nationwide, some former Kmart stores remain vacant while others have been replaced by other big-box stores, fitness centers, self-storage facilities, even churches. One former site in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is now a popular dine-in movie theater.

Employees at the Kmart in Avenel found out last month that the store would close.

Unlike 20 years ago, when news of impending Kmart closures around the country prompted an outpouring of support from loyal shoppers and a Detroit radio station even mounted a campaign to try and save a local store, the closing of the Avenel location was met mostly with an air of resignation.

"It's maybe a little nostalgic because I've lived my whole life in this area, but it's just another retail store closing," said Jim Schaber, a resident of nearby Iselin who said his brother worked in the shoe department at Kmart for years. "It's just another sign of people doing online shopping and not going out to the retail stores."

The closing packed a little more of an emotional punch for Mike Jerdonek, a truck driver who recalled shopping at Kmart in Brooklyn and Queens in his younger days.

"It's like history passing right in front of our eyes," he said as he sat in his car outside the Avenel store. "When I was younger I didn't have any money, so it was a good place to shop because the prices were cheap. And to see it gone right now, it's kind of sad." □



CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Black-board material
- 6 Yule song
- 11 Shade
- 12 Curaçao's neighbor
- 13 Theoretical idea
- 15 "The Matrix" hero
- 16 Bible boat
- 17 Homer's neighbor
- 18 Ring
- 20 Scoundrel
- 23 Raring to go
- 27 Farm unit
- 28 Albacore, e.g.
- 29 Lorry
- 31 One of the Bradys
- 32 Glossy fabric
- 34 — chi (martial art)
- 37 Train unit
- 38 Sauna site
- 41 Blockage
- 44 Skirmish
- 45 Took it easy
- 46 Run, as color
- 47 Foe

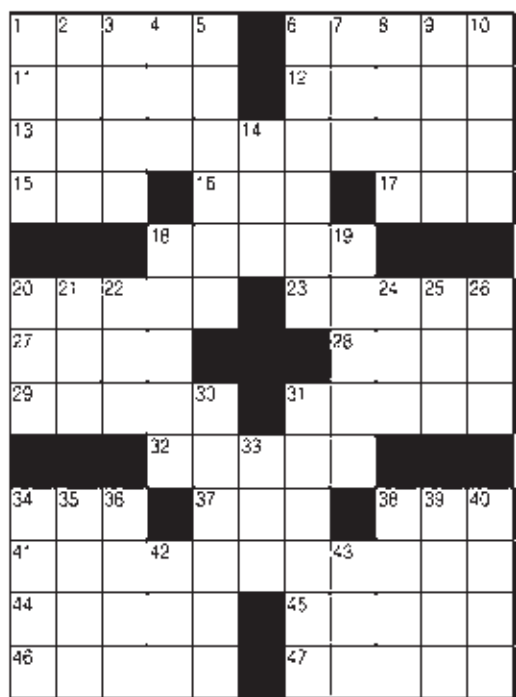
DOWN

- 1 X-ray's kin



Yesterday's answer

- 2 Ear part
- 3 In addition
- 4 Young one
- 5 Gofer's work
- 6 Witch sound
- 7 Gallery fill
- 8 Bankrupt
- 9 Clarinet's kin
- 10 Touch down
- 14 "Roses — red"
- 18 Places for pads
- 19 Classical tongue
- 20 Diet no-no
- 21 Quite cold
- 22 Make mistakes
- 24 Colt creation
- 25 Close
- 26 Beam of light
- 30 Holy
- 31 Compass creation
- 33 Letter after sigma
- 34 Archaeologist's find
- 35 Cain's brother
- 36 Cruise stop
- 38 Tag info
- 39 Limerick, e.g.
- 40 Artist
- 42 Course need
- 43 Shoe hue



4-12

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

4-12

CRYPTOQUOTE

UWPYNZCY T QUMNP WUS

UM OCC, T UG U LOES

CNNK DZKCO NX

NGOWOPPOR. — CONECO

AOEMUEK RYUF

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: SPRING UNLOCKS THE FLOWERS TO PAINT THE LAUGHING SOIL. BISHOP REGINALD HEBER

EXPLAINER: BA.2 variant takes over. What's known about it?



Pharmacist Karen Flynn gives a second Moderna booster shot to her mother Joann Pangonis, of New Boston, Pa., at Morris Drug in Mahanoy City, Pa., on Friday, April 1, 2022.

Associated Press

By LAURA UNGAR

In the latest battle of the coronavirus mutants, an extra-contagious version of omicron has taken over the world.

The coronavirus version known as BA.2 is now dominant in at least 68 countries, including the United States. The World Health Organization says it makes up about 94% of sequenced omicron cases submitted to an international coronavirus database in the most recent week. And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says it was responsible for 72% of new U.S. infections last week.

Dr. Wesley Long, a pathologist at Houston Methodist in Texas, said he's seen BA.2 quickly become dominant in his medical system. At the end of last week, the variant was responsible for more than three-quarters of cases in Houston Methodist hospitals. Less than two weeks earlier, 1% to 3% of cases were caused by BA.2.

"It's not terribly surprising because it is more contagious" than the original omicron, Long said.

As the variant advances,

scientists are learning more about it. But they still don't know exactly how it will affect the trajectory of the pandemic.

WHAT'S KNOWN

BA.2 has lots of mutations. It's been dubbed "stealth omicron" because it lacks a genetic quirk of the original omicron that allowed health officials to rapidly differentiate it from the delta variant using a certain PCR test.

One reason BA.2 has gained ground, scientists say, is that it's about 30% more contagious than the original omicron. In rare cases, research shows it can sicken people even if they've already had an omicron infection — although it doesn't seem to cause more severe disease.

Vaccines appear equally effective against both types of omicron. For both, vaccination plus a booster offers strong protection against severe illness and death.

HAS THE VARIANT PUSHED UP CASES?

Coronavirus cases rose in parts of Europe and Asia when BA.2 became domi-

nant, and some scientists are concerned that the variant could also push up cases across the U.S.

Besides being more contagious, it's spreading at a time when governments are relaxing restrictions designed to control COVID-19. Also, people are taking off their masks and getting back to activities such as traveling, eating indoors at restaurants and attending crowded events.

At this point, overall coronavirus cases in the U.S. are still on the decline. But there have been upticks in some places, including New York, Arizona and Illinois. Health officials have also noted that case counts are getting more unreliable because of the wide availability of home tests and the fact some people are no longer getting tested.

"We're entering a phase where increasing cases or waves may be very regional and it may depend a lot on vaccination levels in the community — and not just vaccination levels but timing of the vaccinations," Long said. "How long ago were they? Did people get boosters? Because we know the immunity to the vaccine wanes a little bit over time."

Long said he feels "very certain" that cases will eventually go back up in the U.S., whether that's because of BA.2 or some future variant. □

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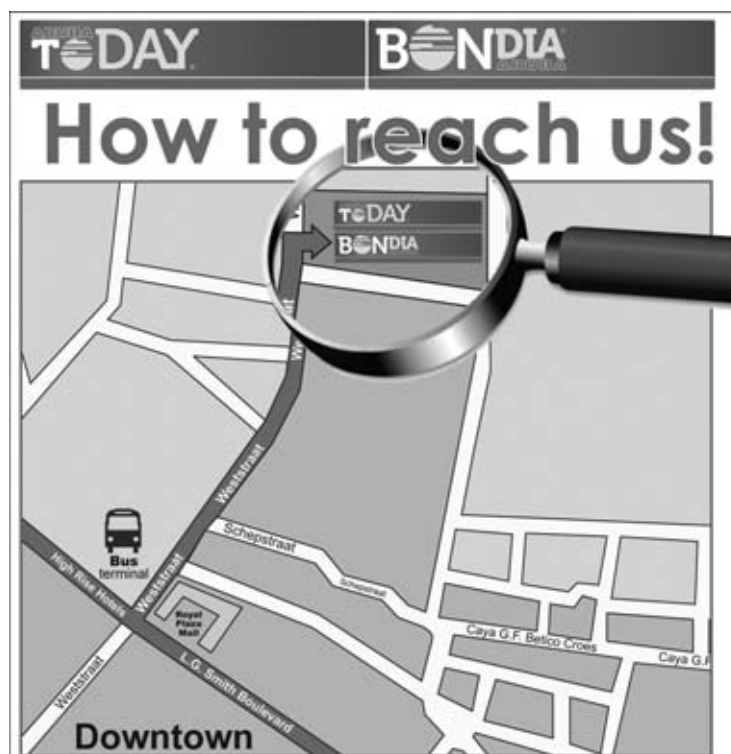
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ESPN's 'KayRod Cast' looks to blend conversation with game

By **JOE REEDY**
AP Sports Writer

Seven months after Peyton and Eli Manning provided a template on how alternate broadcasts could succeed, Alex Rodriguez and Michael Kay think they can improve on it.

The "KayRod Cast" with Rodriguez and Kay debuts Sunday night on ESPN2 when the Boston Red Sox take on the New York Yankees. It will be the first of eight this season that will take place while "Sunday Night Baseball" airs on ESPN. "Well, we're presently in the legal maneuverings to get adopted by a pair of people so we can actually be brothers, so that will give us more of a 'Manningcast' feel," Kay said jokingly during a conference call earlier this week. "I thought the 'Manningcast' was great. I think we're going to pay a little bit more attention to the game."

Alternate broadcasts can go off the rails because the game becomes secondary to the interviews and personalities, but baseball might be the one sport that can blend both due to the pace of play.

While Rodriguez and Kay aren't related like the Mannings, they are longtime friends. Kay has broadcast



Alex Rodriguez, partial owner of the Minnesota Timberwolves NBA team aims a shot at the basket before the first half of an NBA basketball game against the Miami Heat, Saturday, March 12, 2022, in Miami.

Associated Press

Yankees games since 1992 while Rodriguez spent 12 of his 22 major league seasons in pinstripes.

Rodriguez has managed to transition into broadcasting despite some controversies on and off the field. While he has been engaging while doing studio work for Fox, he struggled as an analyst during his four seasons as an analyst in the "Sunday Night Baseball" booth. But Rodriguez thinks he did some of his best analyst work during a short

stay in the "YES Network" booth with Kay and David Cone during a 2019 game against the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"I think it was the best four innings I've ever done on TV because I was in the middle of two very close friends, and it was going back and forth," Rodriguez said. "Michael knows exactly how to set me up because he knows me so well, so I think this format will do well for me."

Rodriguez also thinks his sus-

pension for taking performance-enhancing drugs — and the criticism he got from many, including Kay — helped prepare him for his new opportunity.

"That's what's going to make this show really, I think, good, is because you're going to get forthrightness from both him and I," he said. "Honestly, pre-suspension, I think the show wouldn't have been as good because I wasn't as comfortable. I think I'm just more comfortable in

my skin today, and we're going to let it rip."

Mark Gross, ESPN's senior vice president for production and remote events, said guests during the broadcast are likely to lean more toward players who played well on Sunday afternoon or during the past week. It also will include batting and fielding demos by Rodriguez.

Sunday's show will have Kay and Rodriguez together at ESPN's Seaport District Studios in New York. Some subsequent broadcasts could take place remotely, depending on their schedules. Rodriguez is spending most of his time in Minnesota as part of the ownership group of the NBA's Timberwolves.

When it comes to ratings, comparing "KayRod Cast" to "Manningcast" would be unfair. The "Manningcast" averaged 1.58 million viewers per game last season. By comparison, "Sunday Night Baseball" was up 18% in 2021 according to Nielsen, and averaged 1.46 million.

A better gauge might be audience percentage. Last season, 12% of the total "Monday Night Football" audience watched the Mannings compared to the main broadcast. □

Kelsea Ballerini to co-host CMT Music Awards from home



Kane Brown, left, and Kelsea Ballerini, center, appear at the CMT Music Awards in Nashville, Tenn., on June 9, 2021, and Anthony Mackie appears at the 76th edition of the Venice Film Festival, Venice, Italy, on Aug. 30, 2019.

Associated Press

By **KRISTIN M. HALL**
AP Entertainment Writer
NASHVILLE, Tennessee (AP) — Country star Kelsea Ballerini is making a last-minute pivot to co-hosting the CMT Music Awards remotely after testing positive for COVID-19 days before the show.

Ballerini and actor Anthony Mackie were set to host the Monday night awards show airing on CBS from Nashville. But on Monday morning, CMT and CBS announced that Ballerini will remain home. She is asymptomatic, and Ballerini

said CMT is setting it up so she can perform and co-host from her house.

"It has been set it up in a way where I can safely still co-host the Awards and perform on the show tonight," Ballerini said in a statement. "This is not what we had planned for, but I am ready to make lemonade out of these lemons."

The leading nominee for the night, Kane Brown, has been tapped to help Mackie with in-person co-hosting. Brown has twice hosted the fan-voted show, including with Ballerini last year.

"I'm honored the team at CBS and CMT asked me to step in as a co-host and I am so glad to be back again hosting for a bonus

third year," said Brown in a statement. "Everyone has been working hard to put on an amazing show for the fans and I'm excited to get to work with Anthony and Kelsea and have a great night that celebrates country music."

Mackie, who starred in Marvel's "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier," promises a fun night.

"Being a host of the CMT Awards is something I have wanted to do for a long time," said Mackie in a statement. "I was excited to be able to do it with Kelsea Ballerini. Now, I get to co-host with both Kelsea and my friend, Kane Brown. Get ready cuz it's gonna be a fun night!"

The CMT Music Awards will

feature performances by Kenny Chesney, Mickey Guyton and Black Pumas, Cody Johnson, Miranda Lambert, Little Big Town, Maren Morris and Ryan Hurd, Old Dominion, Carly Pearce, Cole Swindell and Lainey Wilson, Carrie Underwood and Keith Urban. The Judds are also reuniting at the CMT Music Awards for their first major awards show performance in over two decades.

Underwood is the most awarded artist in CMT history with 23 prior wins and has a chance to extend her lead with nominations for music video of the year and collaborative video of the year for her duet with Jason Aldean, "If I Didn't Love You." □

Dream move up in WNBA draft, now poised to make No. 1 pick

NEW YORK (AP) — The Atlanta Dream traded up two spots to get the No. 1 pick in the WNBA draft so they could get the player they feel can help turn around the franchise, which has struggled the last few seasons.

The leading candidates are Rhyne Howard from Kentucky and Nalyssa Smith of Baylor. And on Monday night, players, families and friends will attend the draft in person for the first time since 2019.

"Rhyne is a pro. She's a game changer. She's an elite talent," ESPN analyst LaChina Robinson said. "When you look at all the different things she can do on the basketball court, she can score it from 3, she has a pull-up game, she can get to the rim. There really just isn't anything else from a scoring standpoint that you could ask for."

Atlanta finished 8-24 last season and has missed the playoffs four of the past five seasons. The franchise got new ownership last year, brought in a new coach in Tanisha Wright and have a new general manager in Dan Padover.

The Dream had the No. 1 pick in 2009 and used it to draft Angel McCoughtry. "We're in a rebuild right now, and we're also looking to add pieces that can be with us for a long time," Padover said. "I think having the No. 1 pick in 2022, our hope is this person comes in with fresh energy and sparks something underneath our franchise which we need right now,



Kentucky's Rhyne Howard (10) is guarded by LSU's Khayla Pointer (3) in the second half of an NCAA college basketball game at the women's Southeastern Conference tournament Friday, March 4, 2022, in Nashville, Tenn.

Associated Press

and also embraces the city of Atlanta."

Whoever the Dream don't take first between Howard and Smith will likely be drafted second by Indiana. The Fever haven't had a great draft history the last few seasons; none of their first-round picks over the past three seasons are still on the roster. Indiana brought in Lin Dunn as the interim general manager to bring stability to the fran-

chise. Dunn has four picks (2, 4, 6, 10) in the first round to build a roster around.

"In our particular situation, we need a lot," Dunn said. "We need help inside. We need help outside. It's a little bit easier for us to pinpoint our needs because they're glaring. But we are essentially in that first round with 2, 4, 6 and 10 looking at the best player available."

Washington received the

third pick from the Dream and coach Mike Thibault is comfortable that he'll be able to add a good player to an already strong team. "We're a little bit different than the other two teams in that we have some players coming back to our team, with Elena Delle Donne, Alysha Clark, even Myisha Hines-Allen, who missed a good part of last year, that coming in healthy. We're a different kind of team,

we're a veteran team," said Thibault, also the Mystics GM. "So whoever we draft is not going to be expected to play 25 to 30 minutes."

Some other things to know about the three-round draft:

TRADING NO. 1

This is the second year in a row that the No. 1 pick has been traded before the draft. Last year, New York traded it to the Seattle Storm, who then dealt it to the Dallas Wings. Dallas selected Charli Collier first overall in 2021. With players who could potentially change the course of franchise looming in upcoming drafts — starting with Aliyah Boston of South Carolina next season and Paige Bueckers and Caitlyn Clark the year after — odds are the top pick won't change hands next year.

MAKING A SQUAD

It's incredibly difficult for draftees to make a WNBA roster with only potentially 144 spots available on the 12 teams. It's usually fewer, though, because of salary cap issues and because some teams only carry 11 players. Less than half of last year's 36 draft picks are currently on WNBA rosters.

RECORD-SETTING WOLVERINE

Naz Hillmon had a historic career at Michigan leading the Wolverines to the Elite Eight for the first time in school history. The senior forward could be the program's first player drafted since Tabitha Pool was selected by the New York Liberty in the second round of the 2005 draft. □

Commanders re-sign kicker Joey Slye to 2-year contract

By STEPHEN WHYNO

The Washington Commanders re-signed kicker Joey Slye on Monday, a move designed to solidify a position that was in flux much of last season.

Slye signed a two-year deal that could be worth up to \$5 million with \$2 million guaranteed, according to a person with knowledge of the move. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condi-

tion of anonymity because terms of the contract were not disclosed.

The 26-year-old is one of two kickers on the roster along with Brian Johnson, who was signed when Slye was sidelined by a hamstring injury. Slye and Johnson were the third and fourth kickers Washington used last season after going through Dustin Hopkins and Chris Blewitt.

They now figure to go into

offseason workouts and training camp this summer competing for the job.

Slye goes in as the favorite after going a perfect 12 of 12 on field goals and making nine of 10 extra points with Washington last season in his third stop of a tour around the NFL. He previously bounced around from Houston to San Francisco.

Despite missing four weeks with a hamstring injury that

landed him on injured reserve, Slye found a groove with Washington. And it's no coincidence he landed there: Like many Commanders players, Slye has a Carolina connection to coach Ron Rivera after making his NFL debut with the Panthers in 2019.

Slye who played high school football in Virginia, is going into his fourth pro season. In total last season, Slye made 23 of 25 field

goal attempts and was 18 of 22 on extra points.

After acquiring quarterback Carson Wentz from the Indianapolis Colts, Washington has so far spent the offseason mostly bringing back players rather than adding free agents from the outside. Guard Andrew Norwell and defensive end Efe Obada are the only external free agents the Commanders have signed. □

A day to remember for McIlroy, but no green jacket

By **TIM DAHLBERG**
AP Sports Columnist

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — For the briefest of moments, there was the smallest bit of hope. A day that began with little to shoot for other than a top 10 suddenly threatened to turn magical for Rory McIlroy as he made his way around Augusta National, triumphantly holing his final shot from the sand for a birdie on 18, in a final round that might have won him the Masters any other time.

This wasn't that time because Scottie Scheffler wasn't about to cough this Masters up. Not to the mullet man, Cameron Smith, and certainly not to a player who was 10 shots back to begin the day, no matter McIlroy's impressive golfing pedigree.

But his 8-under 64 was the lowest McIlroy has shot in 14 Masters. His second-place finish was his best, too, in the tournament that has confounded him the most and is the only major he hasn't won.

That it wasn't enough to win McIlroy the green jacket he probably should have been measured for several times by now almost didn't matter. There will be more Masters for the 32-year-old, and if he can remember the fearless way he played on this Sunday there should be a green jacket in there for him somewhere along the way, too.



Rory McIlroy, of Northern Ireland, reacts after holing out from the bunker for a birdie during the final round at the Masters golf tournament on Sunday, April 10, 2022, in Augusta, Ga.

Associated Press

On this Sunday, he had to settle for a little joy as his shot from the bunker dropped in the hole and the roars of the crowd reverberated through the towering Georgia pines.

"That's as happy as I've ever been on a golf course right there," McIlroy said. "That was incredible, I've never heard roars like (that) on the 18th green. It was really cool."

So cool that playing partner Collin Morikawa responded by knocking his bunker shot in, too, with McIlroy raising his arms in celebration like both had just won the Masters. On a day with little

other drama, it seemed like everybody else anywhere near the 18th green was celebrating, too.

It wasn't a win, but in a way it was. Eleven years after he left the Masters almost in tears after blowing a four-shot lead in the final round, McIlroy finally had a Sunday to remember.

"It's what you dream about, right?" he said. "You dream about getting yourself in position."

McIlroy began the day as an afterthought and ended it thinking he might just put a little scare into the unflappable Scheffler. He just might have after mak-

ing eagle on the 13th hole, but wayward drives on the next two holes led to pars and he hit his putt on the 16th just a little too hard to go in.

But his swing was free and easy, and his targets were precise. With no realistic chance of winning barring a huge collapse by the leader, McIlroy attacked the course like he had nothing to lose, making the first of his six birdies on the first hole and playing bogey free the entire day.

He thought shooting 63 might give him a chance, but no one has shot that low on the final day of

the Masters and McIlroy came up one shot short. He thought he might give Scheffler something to think about with the final bunker shot but by then the No. 1 player in the world was already adding back nine birdies of his own.

What it means is difficult to quantify, as are most things in golf. McIlroy felt his game was good coming into the tournament and nothing about losing by three shots changed that thought. There are three majors still to play this year and there's also the tantalizing prospect of coming back here to do it again — except maybe just a bit better — next year.

It's not that McIlroy hasn't had success at the Masters. He's finished in the top 10 in seven of his 14 appearances but never seemed to be in the mix to win late on the back nine on Sunday.

And, of course, he still hasn't won a green jacket to add to his trophies from the other three majors.

"I've always known that I can do it," he said. "I've played good enough around here, maybe just haven't strung four rounds together like that, but I've always known that I have the game to win at this place. It's just a matter of having that game for four days in a row and not making big numbers and shooting yourself in the foot, I guess." □



Major League Baseball commissioner Rob Manfred speaks during a news conference, Thursday March 10, 2022, in New York.

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred gifted major league players Bose headphones on opening day as a peace

offering after a bitter 99-day lockout that delayed the start of the season.

Major League Baseball confirmed that head-

Manfred gifts players headphones as lockout peace offering

phones and a letter signed by Manfred were left at the locker of each player when teams began their seasons Thursday and Friday. The present was first reported by The Athletic.

"Please accept this gift as a small gesture of my appreciation for the hard work that comes with being a Major Leaguer and your respect for our incredible fans," Manfred wrote. "Thank you for everything you do in a game that has such a rich history and deep meaning to our fans

in the U.S. and around the world. Wishing you the best of luck for a successful season."

Manfred's relationship with players has grown increasingly icy since he succeeded Bud Selig as commissioner in 2014.

At the news conference announcing an agreement with the union to end this winter's lockout, Manfred admitted that he's failed in his role as a diplomat to players and pledged to improve the relationship.

Asked what Manfred could

do to mend things this spring, players told The Associated Press the commissioner could do more to present himself as a steward of the game. At least one player, St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Adam Wainwright, said he thought the damage was irreparable.

"To just put it bluntly, he doesn't do anything for us," Wainwright said. "I know how that's going to read, so Commissioner Manfred, don't take it personal. That's just how it looks from a players' standpoint." □